

# SB1607



## 104TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

### State of Illinois

2025 and 2026

SB1607

Introduced 2/4/2025, by Sen. David Koehler

#### SYNOPSIS AS INTRODUCED:

New Act

Creates the Illinois Freedom Trails Commission Act. Establishes the Illinois Freedom Trails Commission. Provides that the purpose of the Commission shall be to explore, research, and commemorate the journeys of freedom seekers and the sites and landmarks in the State that became the networks of the Underground Railroad. Provides that the Commission shall implement educational, landmark preservation, and grant programs. Sets forth provisions concerning membership; terms; compensation; administrative support; and staff. Provides that the Commission shall submit an annual report to the Governor and the General Assembly. Effective immediately.

LRB104 09512 SPS 19575 b

A BILL FOR

1 AN ACT concerning State government.

2 **Be it enacted by the People of the State of Illinois,**  
3 **represented in the General Assembly:**

4 Section 1. Short title. This Act may be cited as the  
5 Illinois Freedom Trails Commission Act.

6 Section 5. Establishment of Commission.

7 (a) The Illinois Freedom Trails Commission is established.  
8 The purposes of the Commission are to explore, research, and  
9 commemorate the journeys of freedom seekers and the sites and  
10 landmarks in this State that became the networks of the  
11 Underground Railroad.

12 (b) The Commission shall consist of a chairperson and 20  
13 additional members appointed by the Governor with the advice  
14 and consent of the Senate. The membership may include, but is  
15 not limited to, persons who are public officials, scholars,  
16 and community-based activists who have knowledge and interest  
17 in promoting the work of the Commission. Members shall be  
18 broadly representative of the State and the variety of groups  
19 interested in promoting the work of the Commission.

20 (c) The terms of the members shall be 4 years. Members  
21 shall serve until their successors are appointed and  
22 qualified. Any vacancy in the membership of the Commission  
23 shall be filled by the Governor with the advice and consent of

1 the Senate for the unexpired term. Members shall serve without  
2 compensation, but may be reimbursed for reasonable expenses.

3 (d) The Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity  
4 shall provide administrative and other support to the  
5 Commission.

6 (e) Subject to appropriation, the Commission shall hire a  
7 full-time professional staff to implement Commission projects.

8 Section 10. Duties of Commission. The Commission shall  
9 have the following duties:

10 (1) to provide resources for individuals and local  
11 entities seeking to learn more about the Underground  
12 Railroad in Illinois, including:

13 (A) an online resource website, including, but not  
14 limited to maps of journeys, historical sites, and  
15 conductor cemetery markers;

16 (B) a calendar of related events in this State;

17 (C) research sources and bibliographies;

18 (D) videos and links to videos; and

19 (E) pictures, brief histories, and other materials  
20 developed locally and at the State level;

21 (2) collaborate with organizations focusing on the  
22 Underground Railroad, including:

23 (A) local and regional Underground Railroad  
24 groups;

25 (B) county and regional historical societies;

1 (C) museums, especially museums that focus on  
2 slavery and the African American experience;

3 (D) academic programs, especially African American  
4 Studies at the college level and history departments;  
5 and

6 (E) organizations in African American communities;  
7 (3) to create a grant funding program;

8 (4) to work with the National Park Service's Network  
9 to Freedom program and serve as a liaison between the  
10 National Park Service and local entities;

11 (5) to explore heritage tourism opportunities  
12 connecting the locations of freedom seeker journeys and  
13 Underground Railroad sites, working with the Illinois  
14 Office of Tourism and regional tourism agencies; and

15 (6) to connect freedom seekers and Underground  
16 Railroad stories to the range of freedom stories across  
17 and throughout the history of Illinois.

18 Section 15. Online database and educational programs.

19 (a) The Commission shall create a publicly available  
20 website that includes educational material concerning freedom  
21 seekers' journeys on the portions of the Underground Railroad  
22 in this State, including:

23 (1) an updated database of freedom seekers and their  
24 journeys to and through Illinois;

25 (2) an updated map of the geography of the Underground

1 Railroad in Illinois; and

2 (3) a biographical dictionary of key persons  
3 identified with the Underground Railroad in Illinois,  
4 including freedom seekers, abolitionist allies, and  
5 pro-slavery antagonists.

6 (b) The Commission, in collaboration with the State Board  
7 of Education, shall develop and implement an educational  
8 program to be made available to every public school in this  
9 State. The educational program shall include instruction on:

10 (1) events of African American history, including the  
11 African slave trade, slavery in the United States, and the  
12 vestiges of slavery in this country;

13 (2) the journeys of freedom seekers and the  
14 Underground Railroad in Illinois; and

15 (3) additional resources and activities to be used in  
16 February as part of Black History Month.

17 (c) The Commission shall identify scholars in higher  
18 education and community-based organizations to engage in  
19 research and to be recruited into a speakers' bureau on the  
20 Underground Railroad and anti-slavery activity in Illinois.

21 (d) The Commission shall support and publicize local  
22 activities in this State that focus on the Underground  
23 Railroad, including offering exhibits at meetings of  
24 organizations open to spreading knowledge about abolitionism  
25 and the Underground Railroad. The Commission shall focus on  
26 supporting organizations in African American communities,

1 including assisting members of those communities undertake  
2 research related to the history of their communities.

3 Section 20. Historic site and landmark recognition and  
4 preservation.

5 (a) The Commission shall develop statewide guidelines for  
6 the evaluation of freedom seeker journeys and Underground  
7 Railroad sites and landmarks in the State. The Commission  
8 shall use the guidelines to determine and maintain a list of  
9 freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites and  
10 landmarks and make the list available to the public. The  
11 Commission shall include a contact person who represents the  
12 site or landmark for each site or landmark included on the  
13 list.

14 (b) The Commission shall develop standards and guidelines  
15 for historic markers, signage, and other commemorative tools  
16 and activities for sites and landmarks listed under subsection  
17 (a). The Commission shall also assist sites and landmarks  
18 listed under subsection (a) that are threatened with  
19 demolition or deterioration.

20 (c) The Commission shall assist individuals and historic  
21 preservation organizations in assessing freedom seeker  
22 journeys and Underground Railroad sites and landmarks and  
23 shall collaborate with the University of Illinois Extension  
24 Master Gardener program, the Department of Natural Resources,  
25 and other partners concerning opportunities for the

1 development of freedom seeker journeys and Underground  
2 Railroad sites and landmarks.

3 Section 25. Grant program. Subject to appropriation, the  
4 Commission may award grants for the following purposes:

5 (1) to research and identify freedom seeker journeys  
6 and Underground Railroad sites and landmarks;

7 (2) to develop heritage tourism and promotional  
8 activities on the Underground Railroad, including  
9 exhibits, lectures, symposiums, and online materials; and

10 (3) to support an Underground Railroad cemetery marker  
11 program.

12 Section 30. Annual report. The Commission shall submit a  
13 report to the Governor and the General Assembly by July 1,  
14 2026, and each year thereafter. The report shall include, at a  
15 minimum, a description of the programs administered by the  
16 Commission.

17 Section 99. Effective date. This Act takes effect upon  
18 becoming law.